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READING NEW WORDS IN CONTEXT

Lesson 4 CONTEXT: Literary Traditions and Beyond

The passage gives you an opportunity to expand your vocabulary. Below are twenty vocabulary items that are used in the passage and in the exercises that follow it.

attribute	flora	infest	sector
bizarre	granular	irony	sparse
carnivorous	horde	metamorphosis	stagnant
centrifugal	humanitarian	predatory	tolerate
fauna	humanoid	relevant	upheaval

Science Fiction Through the Ages

When did writers begin dreaming about space travel? The literature we call science fiction began as a response to the breakneck pace of industrialization in the nineteenth century. To find the earliest example of star-hopping heroes, however, you have to go all the way back to the Roman Empire of the second century A.D. It was then that a Greek named Lucian of Samosata wrote *The True History.* The hero of this ancient space saga travels the heavens, visiting the moon and sun as he passes through the stars.

Lucian's aim was different from that of modern science fiction writers. He used his far-out story to make fun of the tall tales that writers of his day passed off as history. But one **attribute** (1), or characteristic, that much of science fiction shares with Lucian's ancient space story is that it involves a fantastic journey. French novelist Jules Verne (1828–1905) imagined journeys to the center of the earth and voyages deep under the sea. His stories seemed **bizarre** (2) at the time, but modern readers may not find them strange. Verne wrote some of the earliest science fiction.

H. G. Wells (1866–1946), British novelist and social critic, also wrote early science fiction stories. Wells's tales of Martian invaders and time travel are not only entertaining but also **relevant** (3) to readers' lives because they address current social issues.

Some people argue that the first true science fiction story was written in 1818 by Mary Shelley (1797–1851). Her tale of Frankenstein and the monster he creates in his laboratory has frightened people for decades. But the novel also reflects Shelley's **humanitarian** (4) concerns, as it demonstrates how cruel treatment turns the gentle creature into a true monster.

The Imaginary Worlds of Science Fiction

Figures such as Frankenstein's monster that resemble human beings but are not fully human have played an important role in science fiction. The **humanoid** (5) is often a robot. In some tales, the robot is a friendly character who is helpful to humans—for example, C3PO in the *Star Wars* movies. In other stories, the robot is a heartless and even **predatory** (6) villain who is programmed to hunt and destroy innocent and helpless humans.

All science fiction involves science and technology, but not all science fiction writers respond to science and technology in the same way. Some writers seem to be warning against the effects of technology, while others delight in its wonders. Whatever their view, many science fiction writers strive for scientific accuracy. For example, they take the laws of gravity and **centrifugal** (7) force

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into account when writing of spaceships entering and leaving a planet's atmosphere.

Many readers will not **tolerate** (8) inaccurate scientific information in the stories they read. Others, however, are willing to overlook some distortion. They don't care if the **granular** (9) substance that the main character puts into a liquid won't dissolve in the real world. "Pretend that it will and get on with the story," they say. But the purist says, "You want me to believe the guy is drinking a glass of tiny pebbles?"

Science Fiction in the Atomic Age

Some of the strangest distortions of scientific information occurred when science fiction began to deal with the possible effects of atomic warfare on the earth's **flora** (10) and **fauna** (11). There is no doubt that high levels of radiation have disastrous effects on both plant and animal life, but writers sometimes have taken these effects to extremes. **Flora** would certainly be affected, but the sudden appearance of giant killer carrots seems unlikely! In science fiction tales about the **upheaval** (12) of civilization that follows a nuclear disaster, people are terrorized by mutant **fauna**—even their own pets undergo a **metamorphosis** (13) and become giant **carnivorous** (14) monsters, eating every animal and human being in their path. And the insects that **infest** (15), or invade, people's homes greedily devour humans, dogs, cats, and anything else that gets in their way.

Strange and Distant Worlds

Another recurring theme in science fiction has been the invasion of earth by visitors from another planet. In some stories, the visitors are friendly and come to save earth from destruction. This story line usually involves an **irony** (16): Most human beings see the invaders as a threat and reject their help. Humans who treat the aliens kindly are punished by the people in their community who are determined to kill the aliens. In other tales, a **horde** (17) of evil aliens descends upon a small town with a **sparse** (18) population. A handful of people must struggle against a force that not only outnumbers them, but also possesses superior technology.

Still other science fiction stories take place on strange and distant planets. These stories may rely primarily on human characters, often people who have left earth to colonize the universe. Sometimes the people living in one **sector** (19) of a space colony are in conflict with a group living in another section. In other stories the struggle is between humans and nonhumans. Because writers have so many different settings, plots, and characters available to them, science fiction is unlikely to become **stagnant** (20). The writers can always find ways to make their stories fresh and alive.

EXERCISE 1 *Finding Synonyms*

Directions. Reread the preceding passage. Then write on the line provided a synonym for each of the words in boldface. If you cannot think of an exact synonym, you may write a brief definition of the word.

1. **attribute** _____
2. **bizarre** _____
3. **relevant** _____
4. **humanitarian** _____
5. **humanoid** _____
6. **predatory** _____

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7. centrifugal _____
8. tolerate _____
9. granular _____
10. flora _____
11. fauna _____
12. upheaval _____
13. metamorphosis _____
14. carnivorous _____
15. infest _____
16. irony _____
17. horde _____
18. sparse _____
19. sector _____
20. stagnant _____

EXERCISE 2 *Reading Strategically*